

# A study on central park, new york



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As I stand on the Columbus Circle, the north-west corner of the Central Park, I can feel the massiveness of the park. Central Park is one of the world's greatest man-made natural landscapes covering an area of 843 acres. For a city to be deemed as truly great, a great landscaped park is essential. With this vision of a great city, Central Park was built in the heart of the New York. The events that led to the Central Park began as early as the 1850's. Central Park has a rich history, with its own ups and downs. Park administrators came and went, but Central Park has stood the test of time with careful efforts from its conservancy. This park is host to about twenty-five million visitors each year and is a National Historic Landmark. Located between the 59th and 110th street and Fifth and Eighth Avenues, it is 0.5 miles wide and 2.5 miles long. The park consists of a zoo, two skating rinks, extensive walking tracks, a wildlife sanctuary and a number of other landmarks. The park has its own wildlife and a number of migratory birds visit the park.

The history of Central Park can be dated as far back as the 1850's. A number of events took place before the actual plan of the Central Park was proposed and the man who started this movement was a merchant called Robert Browne Minturn. On returning from an eighteen-month long tour of Europe in the winter of 1849-50, he had no doubts in his mind that New York City needed a phenomenal park to get into that elite category of the great cities of the world. Conversations among the aldermen of New York often "turned upon the differences between our own country and city, and those abroad; and the remark was made that there was no want of our city so great as a large park for walking and driving (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 15)." London had the Hyde Park, Paris had Le Bois de Boulogne and New York had none.

Hence, it was decided that the 150 acres of land between the 66th and 75th streets and Third Avenue and the East River (known as the Jones Wood Estate at that time) would serve as ideal place to develop a landscape park. In the summer of 1851, the state gave the power to the city to take up the land and develop a park that would put New York alongside London and Paris. This park was to be financed by the city from the tax-payer's money. But as was this park getting close to a reality, huge questions were raised about it. First of all the location of the park was questioned. The park's was located at one end of the city and its accessibility would be tough from all corners of the city. Secondly, few people were of the opinion that the building of the park should be financed by the adjacent landowners. Lastly, some were doubtful if the park would serve the needs of all the communities. As a result, on June 29 1851, aldermen Henry Shaw and Nicholas Dean recommended a more centrally located park. This proposal came two weeks before the legislature was to approve the undertaking of the Jones Wood estate and led to a " three year battle over whether, where, and at whose expense New York would create its grand public park(Rosenzweig and Blackmar 43)." A " central park" would offer economic as well as cultural advantages over the one sided Jones Wood estate. Dean and Shaw proposed the area between Fifth and Eighth Avenues and from 58th to 106th as the perfect place for this park. Although, this area of land was about five times as big as the Jones Wood estate, its rough topography would bring the land cost down. The proposal of a " central park" sounded much more practical and it was a huge blow to those who lobbied for the Jones Wood. The whole city was drawn into a fight between a " central park" and the Jones Wood. Newspapers were full of debates on which park better suited the needs of

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the people. " In 1853, the New York State legislature authorized two large parks in New York City. But in January 1854 a judge overturned the Jones Wood legislation, confirming that Central Park alone would become the New York's public garden(Rosenzweig and Blackmar 53)."

The next task in building of the Central Park was to acquire the land. This piece of land was inhabited by about sixteen hundred people. Most of the inhabitants comprised of poor immigrants and African-Americans who, at that time, had no power stand up against this decision. Also, the methods used by the city to evict them were inhumane. For e. g. there was a 3 a. m. raid by the Central Park Police at a dance hall, which left the residents bewildered. The residents left their home without any violence. The next important task, to survey the land and estimate the amount of capital that would go into developing that land, was handed over to a commission. This commission came out with a report on October 4, 1855, which estimated the cost of land acquisition to be about \$ 5 million. The report shocked the tax-payers, who were earlier promised that the land would cost no more than \$ 1. 5 million. But the city was hell bent on creating this landscape park and it took them nearly four years before the first construction on the site could begin. " By the fall of 1857, the city had paid off most of the land owners, collected most of the assessments, and cleared the park of most of its residents and structures(Rosenzweig and Blackmar72)."

After finishing off with the basic part of land acquisition, the Central Park Commission announced the design competition for the park. The commission welcomed entries from expert designers and architects as well as amateur enthusiasts and offered prizes for the best proposals. The park

commissioners did specify certain requirements such certain features to be included in the design and fixed the cost of building to \$ 1. 5 million. The commission gave the people of New York City a chance to design their own park. The commission received about thirty-five entries, most of which had common problems and offered similar solutions. The winner of this competition was a plan called the “ Greensward Plan,” which was submitted by the park’s superintendent, Fredrick Law Olmsted, and the English-born architect Calvert Vaux. This was going to become one of the benchmarks in the history of landscape architecture. “ From the commissioner’s perspective, more than aesthetics were at stake; politics as much as artistic merit determined just how the nation’s first and most famous landscape park would be designed and built(Rosenzweig and Blackmar 77).” During this period the politics of the park were in hand of the Republican commissioners, who had close ties to both Olmsted and Vaux. The contest over Central Park’s design did not, however, end with the decisions of the commissioners. In May 1958 Olmsted was appointed as the park’s architect-in-chief and he in turn appointed Vaux as his assistant. However, questions were raised on the selection of this plan and Herald’s James Gordon Bennett attributed its selection to politics. In response to this, the park’s commission began public display of the plan. After many debates over the plan, the circulation system in the park was modified from what was suggested by Olmsted and the building of the park finally started.

Developing the 800+ acres of park area would take a massive and a pain staking effort up until 1866. The park’s construction was at its peak in 1859 and 1860, “ the Board of Commissioners of Central Park was one of the city’s

largest employers, hiring an average four thousand workers each year, with as many as thirty-six hundred laborers working on a single day at the peak of construction in early September 1859(Rosenzweig and Blackmar 110).” The process of making a drainage system in the park began in 1858 and was one of the most important parts of the construction. By December 1858, “ the drainage gangs had laid twenty miles of drain pipes in the southern portion of the park. They also had accomplished the more dramatic feat of filling the twenty-acre lake south of the Ramble in time for the winter skating season (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 120).” During a Sunday in December 1958, about three hundred skaters showed up at this newly filled lake. These skaters were supposedly the first users of the park. The work in the park was being completed rapidly during this period. However, the budget of the park was creeping up day by day. By July 1859, the expenditure of the park had already surpasses the stipulated \$1. 5 million by \$ 500, 000 and the board estimated that it would require another \$ 1. 6 million bringing the total expenditure to \$ 3. 6 million. This was a major concern to the park commissioners and they launched an investigation into it. They blamed Olmsted for all the over expenditure and he was relieved of his duties in June 1861. Andrew Green, one of the board members, was appointed as the park’s comptroller. The end of the year 1863 marked the completion of the park up until 102nd street and below. The commission board also acquired the land between 106th and 110th streets, adding a further 65 acres to the original area bringing the park size to a total of 843 acres. Finally in 1866, after the immense labor and a total of \$ 5 million, “ emerged the park’s drives, paths, bridges, hills, lakes, lawns and scenic vistas(Rosenzweig and Blackmar 194).”

The gatekeepers of the park maintained a record of the number people entering the park. 1860's saw a total of seven million New Yorkers visiting the park; four million or so arrived on carriages and horses, remaining arrived on foot. The number of people visiting the park was expanding exponentially and as a result the board commission dropped the idea of counting them. One of the key attractions of the park was the open fields, where a game of cricket or base-ball was seen in early days of its opening. However, the commission banned the usage of these fields for playing such kind of sports. Another restriction in the park was holding music concerts on Sundays. " No music or boat rentals were permitted on Sunday's in the 1860's, but neither did they make it more appealing or enjoyable for the working families who had only that day on which to visit (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 235)." The 1870's was to see a change in park politics and its decline.

" At 5: 15 p. m. on April 20, 1870, the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park adjourned its final meeting, expressing apprehension and deep concern about the future (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 289)." The reason for their " deep concern" was the Tweed charter by which the control of the park was to be transferred and the home rule was restored in the park. This would lead to the park commissioners being appointed by the mayor and ultimately to a decade of debate on the park and its deterioration. 1870 also saw the easing of the park rules. Since, the attendance of the park was increasing day by day; the regulations imposed in 1860's gave way. Boat rentals were in full flow on Sunday and there were pony and goat rides for children. The Central Park Zoo was not included in the original Greensward Plan. However,

later amendments in the plan had led to a provision of a zoo. There was a lot of debate about the location of the zoo. Olmsted was opposed to it being in the main body of the park and he drew up a plan to put one at Manhattan Square (the area between 77th and 81st streets and Eighth and Ninth Avenues, which is now the site of American Museum of Natural History). However, the legislation decided to make one in the main park and a zoo had emerged even before they noticed. The early zoo comprised of pets of children who had died or some were gifted. The zoo didn't come to prominence up until 1870 when the park department decided to buy animals rather than just take whatever was left. The year 1880 saw the opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, directly opposite to the Manhattan Square, on the other end of the park. Poor maintenance saw the park's deterioration. The park's drainage problem was a worry to the uptown developers. Also by the 1890's, most of the lakes were stagnant dirt pools. These problems led to the filling of the Lake at 77th street and filling the lakes' bottom with asphalt and concrete. " By the early 1880's the four traverse road had so deteriorated that the one at the 85th Street bore virtually all cross town traffic (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 344)."

During the late 19th century, New York City was growing at a rapid rate. This industrial growth had a direct effect on the park. The Automobile Club of America filed a petition to allow motorcars in the park and the beginning of 20th century saw new motorcars being driven all over the park. " In 1906 three people died in what may have been the park's first fatal accident (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 478)." By the mid-1920 the opposition to automobiles in the park grew due to an increase in park's traffic. Finally in



1930, Senator Nathan Straus decided to put a ban on automobiles in the park. The urbanization of the city was putting more and more demands on the Central Park. People weren't satisfied with just the natural landscape; they wanted to be entertained, to play. Hence, to keep pace with the time, the park administration met with the politicians and the people, and decided to introduce a number of improvements. This led to the building of the Heckscher Playground at 61st Street and Seventh Avenue in 1926. In January 1926, Jimmy Walker was appointed as New York City's mayor and he had in mind the expansion and development of the park. He started by allocating \$ 10 million to develop the park system of the city. He added another \$ 30 million to provide play spaces in crowded areas, but poor management left the program incomplete. " He also supplied a million dollar appropriation for rehabilitating the Central Park that its friends had been urging for year." Due to all these efforts, Central Park was in a better shape than ever before. In January 1934, Robert Moses was appointed as the park's commissioner along with La Guardia. Moses was much more interested in recreation rather than conservation. " For him Central Park was essentially a playground (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 502)." The zoo walls were rebuilt with brick and concrete, the open fields gave an effect of a big college football pitch. There was extensive plowing, seeding, planting and re-planting. The park was being turned from a natural landscape to a commercial natural landscape. There was only single playground till 1934, but in three more years there were twenty-two playgrounds.

The 1970's saw one of the greatest economic depressions in America. These crises hit the park very hard and there was a 60% drop in the department's

budget. Also, there was a significant decrease in the number of workers employed by the department. The 1970's left the park in "advanced state of deterioration." Cleaning could only be done weekly and the open fields had turned into a dust bowl. In 1980's, in a serious attempt to preserve the Central Park, The Central Park Conservancy was formed. The conservancy's goals were "to assist in the physical restoration of the park and to bring about improvements in its maintenance and security (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 533)." There was a newly appointed Central Park administrator who would serve as the chief executive officer of both the park and the conservancy. Rebuilding the Central Park was estimated to cost \$ 150 million and would take about ten to fifteen years. "By the end of its first decade, the conservancy raised \$ 65 million for the park(Rosenzweig and Blackmar 591)." This venture was going to be both public and private in nature. The Greensward Plan was considered as a blue print to this restoration. 1980's had begun a very tangible movement towards the present Central Park.

It's a sunny Sunday afternoon and I am lying down on my back in one of park lawns under a tree's shadow. Everyone is have a good time and a cool breeze is blowing through the park. The tall skyscrapers around the park seem as if they are guarding the park. There are a number of small birds chirping around and all I can do is admire the beauty the park. I have been here since morning but this park just doesn't let you go. Maybe that's why it's one of the greatest parks in the world. You can just sit here for hours and get lost in its beauty. The Central Park makes New York one of the greatest cities in the world.